

must be submitted online only. Whatever the format, the main elements will be required, although how they appear will vary with each proposal. In most RFPs, the soliciting organization explains what should be included in the proposal (either specific information to be included or major elements). Often, RFPs indicate the maximum number of pages allowed in a proposal. Writers should follow these instructions carefully to ensure that the proposal is not rejected during the initial screening process because it violates the specifications stipulated by the RFP.

Summary. The summary is by far the most important section of the proposal. Many proposal consultants believe that a project will be accepted or rejected based solely on the effectiveness of the summary. The summary creates your readers' first impression of what you are proposing. It should concisely describe the project, particularly how your work meets the requirements of the soliciting organization, your plan for doing the work, and your or your company's main qualifications. The summary should be a concise version of the detailed plan, but it should be written to convince readers that you understand what the soliciting firm needs and wants, that what you are proposing can be done as you describe, and that your approach is solid because you have the required knowledge and expertise. After reading the summary, readers should want to read more of your proposal.

Project description (technical proposal). The technical proposal describes what you or your company proposes to do. The description must be as specific as possible. The technical proposal has a number of elements.

Introduction. The proposal introduction should explain what you are proposing, why you are proposing this idea, and what you plan to accomplish. The introduction contains the same elements as any introduction. In short proposals, the summary and introduction can be combined.

Rationale and significance. Your success in writing a winning proposal will rest largely on your ability to convince your readers that you understand the project. In the section on rationale and significance, you need to make clear that you know the needs of the readers—as stated in the summary or introduction—and that you have designed your goals by analyzing and defining their needs. Although you will clearly try to sell your idea, you should recognize and answer any questions your readers may have as you argue the merits of your project. Convincing your readers that you fully understand what they are looking for is critical in establishing your credibility.

In short,

- You may want to define the problem to show that you understand it.
- You may want to explain the background of the problem and how it evolved by providing a historical review of the problem.
- You may want to explain why your project is necessary and what results can be expected from it.
- You may want to describe your solution and the benefits of your proposed solution.

Of greatest importance, however, is the *feasibility* of the work you propose. Is your proposed work doable? Is it suitable, appropriate, economical, and practicable? Have you given your readers an accurate view of what you can and will do?

Plan of the work. The section on the work plan is also critical, particularly to expert readers who will attempt to determine whether you understand the breadth of the work you are proposing. In this section, you will describe how you will go about achieving the goals you have stated. You will specify what you will do and in what order, explaining and perhaps justifying your approach as you believe necessary. A realistic approach is crucial in that a knowledgeable reader will sense immediately if your plan omits major steps. A flawed work plan can destroy your credibility as well as the merits of the goals or the solution you are proposing.

Scope. The work plan section may need to describe the scope of the proposed work. What will you do and not do? What topics will your study or your work cover and not cover? What are the limits of what you are proposing? What related topics will be outside the scope of your project? As the writer of the proposal, you have both an ethical and a legal obligation to make clear to your readers the limits of your responsibility. You must avoid creating expectations that you do not intend to meet.

Methods. A work plan may also require a statement of the methods you will use. If you are going to do on-site research, how will you do this research? If you plan to collect data, how will you do so? How will you analyze this data? How will you guarantee the validity of the analysis? If your research includes human subjects, how will you make sure that their participation is voluntary and their privacy is protected? If you are going to conduct surveys or interviews, how will you do so and what questions will you ask? If you plan to do historical research or a literature review of a topic, how will you approach such a review to ensure that your findings are representative of what is currently known about a subject area? What precautions will you take to verify that your research is conducted according to applicable ethical and legal standards? A precise, carefully detailed description of your work methods can add to your credibility as one who is competent to perform the proposed work.

Task breakdown. Almost all proposals require you to divide your work into specific tasks and to state the amount of time allotted to each task. This information may be given in a milestone chart, as illustrated in the methods section of the student research proposal (see Case 9-1). The task breakdown indicates how much time you plan to devote to each task. A realistic time schedule also becomes an effective argument. It suggests to readers that you understand how much time your project will take and that you are not promising miracles just to win approval of your proposal or business plan.

If a project must be completed by a deadline, the task breakdown and work schedule should indicate exactly how you plan to fit every job into the allotted time. However, do not make time commitments that will be impossible to meet. Readers who sense that your work plan is unrealistic will immediately question